

REMARKS

This amendment is in response to the Office Action dated July 31, 2003.

Claims 6, 7, 9, 11, 13 - 21 are pending herein. Claims 1 - 5, 8, 10 and 12 have been cancelled without prejudice. Claims 6, 13, and 17 are independent claims. Claims 6, 7, 9, 11, 15 -19 are amended to more particularly point out and distinctly claim Applicant's invention. Claims 19 - 21 are added as dependent claims.

The Office Action at Page 7 indicates Claims 17 and 18 contain allowable subject matter. Claim 17 is amended to be an independent claim and therefore Claims 17 and 18 are allowable. Applicants appreciate the Examiner's suggestion to rewrite Claim 17 in independent form.

The Office Action Page 2, objects to drawing inclusions. Filed herewith is a letter to Chief Draftperson requesting minor changes to Figures 2, 10 and 11 to avoid the Office Action objections. No new matter is added. Note reference character 22 appears at the present specification page 8. Approval is requested for these drawing changes which, if approved, shall be included in the formal drawings filed following receipt of a Notice of

Allowability in this application.

Claims 6, 7, 9, 11, 13 - 16 stand rejected under 35 USC 103(a) as being unpatentable over the Basavanhally et al. application in view of the Bonja application. Applicant's respectfully traverse this rejection for the following reasons. Neither Basavanhally nor Bonja discloses or teaches a front mask having a flexible arm substantially longer than the diameter of the fiber to be seated within the opening and the arm having a distal end that contacts the fiber for pressing it against the side wall. Instead, Basavanhally includes no arm at all and Bonja only teaches springs with no distal ends (Figure 8A), springs with lengths less than the fiber diameter (Figure 8B) and springs that engage the fiber at the mid-region of the spring (Figure 1 and Figure 8).

Applicants are the first to teach the Claim 6 combination wherein the arm length is much greater than the fiber diameter and the full length of the arm is used for flexing and pressing against the fiber, i.e., the distal end contacts the fiber. This structure provides an arm with much greater flexibility and spring action than shorter, usable portions of Bonja's structure. These differences are important to the technical and fiber assembly performance of the plate/masks because Bonja springs are much more

likely to break or crack than the longer arms defined by Claim 6.

Accordingly, Applicants respectfully submit neither Basavanhally nor Bonja, alone or in combination render Claim 6 obvious under 35USC 103(a), and Applicants request withdrawal of the rejection thereof.

Applicants submit Claim 7 is allowable since Bonja Figure 8A (and Figure 8B) lacks an opening with a stationary side wall and Figure 1 lacks an opening with two springs. Figure 7 is as deficient as Figure 1 since it discloses one spring in each opening of two plates.

Claims 7 and 9, Applicants submit are also allowable since they depend from Claim 6 for the reasons stated above for Claim 6.

Claims 13 - 16 stand rejected as being unpatentable under 35 USC 103(a) over Basavanhally in view of Bonja. These claims are directed to, e.g., the embodiment shown in Figures 17 - 23 hereof. Claim 13 (amended) clarifies that the front mask is made of one material and the means for pressing is made of a second, more flexible material. Neither reference cited by the Office Action contemplates this structure or function.

Claims 14 - 16 depend from Claim 13. Claim 15 calls for the flexible elements are formed as part of an elongated member and

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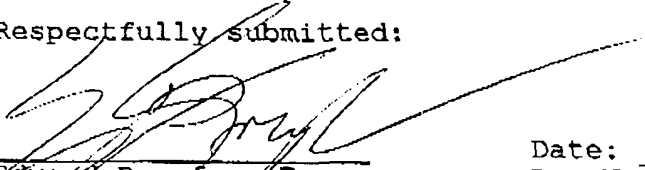
Claim 16 calls for the elongated members to extend along elongated slots which slots communicate with the fiber seating openings. See, e.g., description of slots 84 at present specification page 12 and Figures 17 - 19. None of these features are even contemplated by either reference cited in the Office Action rejection of Claims 13 - 16.

Claims 19 - 21 are allowable for reasons stated above for each claim parent. Further Claim 19 calls for the arm at least mid-section being thinner than the front mask body regions. This enhances the arm's flexibility.

Applicants request entry of the above amendments, reconsideration in view of the above remarks and withdrawal of the subject rejections. A Notice of Allowability is requested.

In the event prosecution can be efficiently advanced with a telephone conference it is requested that the undersigned attorney be called at 908-233-4666.

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